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Dark Hope

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Stress and trauma can cloud even the strongest mind. Fear and anger are emotions that can sharpen the will but dull its edge at the same time. There are few times more difficult in life than the moment when you come face to face with your inner demons and must make a fateful choice between right and wrong. Worse still are those decisions with no clear definition of which choice is the right one.

When no path seems safe, when every option seems fraught with guilt and peril, which one do you choose?

It occurred to Jeht that the office of the Supreme Chancellor was kept rather cold, something he noticed every time he'd been here previously but never really thought about. He'd always assumed it matched the climate that the former Senator was used to on Naboo, but Jeht's recent visit to that world had shown him otherwise.

Why, then, was it always so cold here? Master Jeht's body was optimized for speed and grace, a genetic tendency that he'd honed with years of physical training and a Jedi's dietary regimen. That left him with very little body fat and the few unfortunate side effects such a build carried with it - - namely, a lack of resistance to low temperatures. It made being in cold places something of a trial.

Then again, he noted wryly to himself as he waited, why should a visit to Coruscant be any less a crucible than any other day in his life lately?

Jeht was also not much for waiting; he preferred to be moving and doing things over the quiet contemplation of many of his peers. He could meditate, of course, and did so with increasing frequency as the Clone Wars dragged on, but rest was not his natural state of being. He found peace in motion, not stillness.

Thus, it was a very uncomfortable and restless Jedi Master that Supreme Chancellor Palpatine found in his office when he finally arrived.

"Ah, Master Jeht. How good of you to come so promptly." The smiling ex-Senator glided across the room in his ornate, midnight-blue robes of state and settled into his high backed chair. "We appreciate the alacrity."

Jeht raised his hand to wave off the formality. "Sir, I came as quickly as I could, given the urgency of my orders. I feared any delay would only worsen these proceedings."

The Supreme Chancellor looked up from one of the many screens built into his desk and regarded the Jedi Master with a fleeting expression of confusion. "Proceedings?"

With a quiet clearing of his throat, Jeht nodded. "Yes, sir. The communication I received aboard the Maelstrom ordered me to bring my fleet to Coruscant immediately so that I might stand before a Board of Inquiry regarding the destruction of Kromus in the Kro'eval system."

The mention of that incident seemed to catch the Supreme Chancellor's attention from whatever he was reading on his desk displays. "Kromus? Oh, yes. A most tragic affair, to be sure, and the subject of much discussion these days."

Jeht shifted in his chair, growing more uncomfortable by the moment. "Yes, sir. I am sure there will be a full investigation before this matter can be resolved." When the Supreme Chancellor did not immediately respond, he added, "I want you to know that I intend to cooperate fully and abide by whatever decision the Senate - - "

It was Palpatine's turn to raise his hand dismissively. "Master Jeht, the Senate will not be conducting your inquiry. That house of politicians is far more preoccupied with keeping their own worlds under control than worrying about the loss of a Separatist stronghold." With a distasteful expression that bordered on a scowl, he concluded, "You won't be defending your actions on Kromus to them."

That was something of a blow to Jeht. He'd feared it would come to this, but he'd offered himself the slim hope that as a Jedi and a General in the Republic Army, he could present his case to a forum of bureaucrats. That would have given him the advantage in knowledge and rank.

But no. "I'll have to speak before a military tribunal then, sir?"

For a moment, the Supreme Chancellor's face was a mask of grim neutrality that only deepened Master Jeht's dread. Then Palpatine's pale lips split in a smile that seemed far warmer than the chill of his office. "No, my dear boy, you just have to answer to me."

After waiting a moment for that to set in for the surprised Jedi, he continued. "Tell me, Darrus, did you do what was necessary?"

"I..." Jeht found himself at a loss for words. This wasn't what he'd expected at all. Finally, he replied. "Yes, sir. I did, sir. I had no choice."

The Supreme Chancellor's tone became a strange mix between paternal and vaguely conspiratorial. "And were your actions, terrible as they were, in the interest of galactic security and safety?"

Jeht nodded as confidently as he could. "Yes, sir, they were. If we'd let the Starkiller super weapon clear its facility, it could have made the jump to hyperspace before we got another weapons lock on it. That would have..."

"Yes, yes, of course." Palpatine's smile reappeared. "And if you had to make a similar choice, one that could again mean the destruction of millions

or even billions, would you do as you did then?"

The Jedi Master's senses noted something in the air. Without knowing how or why, he suddenly felt convinced that he was standing at a moment in time far more important than it appeared. It was another crossroads, just like the split second before he gave the order to fire on Kromus. His next words would be vital.

With a deep breath, Jeht nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. I stand by my decision and would do so again without hesitation. Peace and security in the galaxy must be my primary mission." He set his jaw and finished with, "If it were not, I would not be fit to serve you, the Republic, or the Jedi Council, sir."

And just like that, the die was cast. He'd made a choice, for better or worse, and there was no turning back. Strangely, he also felt as if he'd avoided some great and terrible danger. The Force grew calm around him even as the Supreme Chancellor smiled for a third time and slipped his hands out of the deep sleeves of his robe.

"My boy... I am so proud of you. Consider this entire matter over and done with. I will inform the Senate that the inquiry has been conducted, and that you have been exonerated of all charges, pending or otherwise."

Palpatine rose from his chair and gestured for Jeht to do the same. "On a more personal note," he said, coming close enough to rest his hand on the Jedi Master's shoulder, "let me express my admiration for your resolve. If I had more Jedi like you leading the Army, this war would already be won."

Jeht felt a slight flush to his cheeks. He wasn't used to praise, having been raised his whole life in one Academy or another. "Thank you, sir."

The Supreme Chancellor shook his head. "No, Master Jeht, it is I who should thank you. So few have the resolve to do what must be done in this day and age. The Republic has bred generation after generation of weakness at every level of society. Men like you and I see what must be done to keep peace and order in the galaxy. Men willing to use any means necessary."

Jeht nodded, not really understanding Palpatine's meaning but appreciating his support. "I meant thank you for taking care of the inquiry, sir. I was worried the Council would seek my removal from service."

Palpatine looked him in the eye and smiled again. "I simply could not allow that, Master Jedi. You are exactly where you need to be. Where I need you to be."

Jeht nodded again, bowed, and excused himself from the office. In part, he wanted to get out of the freezing room and find someplace warmer. He also felt a sudden discomfort that had nothing to do with the temperature. "If you need anything, sir, do not hesitate to contact me on the Maelstrom."

Palpatine spoke before he could reach the door. "Actually, Darrus, I do have a question for you. Something to consider while you wait for your shuttle."

The Supreme Chancellor had done him a good turn, one that deserved to be

repaid. Jeht stopped and turned toward him. "Of course, sir. Anything you wish."

Palpatine brought his hands together in contemplation and spoke his next words very carefully, as if each were of grave import. The feeling in the back of Jeht's mind led him to believe that indeed they were.

"You have grown very powerful in the Force, and I have kept a close eye on your progress during your tenure with the Jedi. They have taught you much, but surely you have sensed that in some ways - - in many ways - - they keep secrets from you..."

Though he trailed off, the Supreme Chancellor resumed speaking before Jeht could interrupt. "I simply want you to consider what you would be willing to do for the whole truth. How much is enlightenment worth to you?"

"How powerful do you wish to become?"

And with that, the Supreme Chancellor opened the door to his office and waved a cordial goodbye to him, wishing Master Jeht a safe voyage back to his ship. The dismissal was as rapid as Palpatine's questions had been deliberate.

As he walked back to the speeder bay at the edge of the Executive Plaza, Jeht gave the Supreme Chancellor's words the consideration they deserved. What would he be willing to do? How powerful did he want to become?

And what did Palpatine mean by "secrets" the Council was keeping from him? He'd never questioned the Council or its motives before, but Palpatine's words changed all that. He was right; Jeht did feel as if there was something he didn't know - - something they'd never told him.

With sudden determination, he turned his airspeeder toward the Republic military hangars and contacted his ship to plot a course back to Almas in the Cularin system. If a secret was being kept from him, that's where he'd learn the truth. Master Windu had conducted a secret meeting with the Academy's headmaster some time ago; the nature of that meeting had never been disclosed.

The time had come for Jeht to confront Headmaster Qel-Bertuk and seek some "disclosure" of his own. He wasn't sure Lanius would be forthcoming, but he knew how he'd get what he wanted.

By any means necessary.